

7-2015

# Outside the 'Big 4': Inception and growth of independent artistes and institutions

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## Citation

RAMASWAMI, Seshan. Outside the 'Big 4': Inception and growth of independent artistes and institutions. (2015). *Kala Manjari: 50 Years of Indian Classical Music and Dance in Singapore*. 75-99. Research Collection Lee Kong Chian School Of Business.

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Published in Kala Manjari: 50 Years of Indian classical music and dance in Singapore, 2015, pp. 75-99.



## CHAPTER 4

# OUTSIDE THE 'BIG 4': INCEPTION AND GROWTH OF INDEPENDENT ARTISTES AND INSTITUTIONS

DR. SESHAN RAMASWAMI<sup>1</sup>

**S**ingapore's resident Indian population, inclusive of citizens and permanent residents of Indian origin, has been steadily rising alongside the country's explosive growth in the last two decades. As of June 2014, according to the Population Trends 2014 report of the Department of Statistics, this number stood at over 350,000,

and this does not include employment pass holders. While the Indian migrants in the early part of Singapore's history were mainly Tamil speakers from Tamil Nadu in India or from various parts of Malaysia, recent times have seen a large number of professionally qualified Indians and business persons from across the subcontinent migrating

<sup>1</sup> The author gratefully acknowledges the contributions of Dr. Siri Rama (interviews with Dr. Bhagya Murthy, Raka Maitra, Gayatri Sriram, Maalika Girish Panicker), Lavanya Ramesh (interview with Sitaravamma Sandrasegaren) and Sarita Alurkar-Sriram (interview with Chitra Shankar) to this chapter. While most of the material in this chapter is based on personal, phone or email interviews with the artistes and institutional founders, some materials have been sourced through the artistes' websites and based on the author's personal correspondence, and interactions with these artistes and other institutional leaders.

to Singapore. This phenomenon has affected the Indian classical music and dance scene in Singapore in several different ways. There has been a large increase in the number of “serious amateur” musicians and dancers who have received training for many years under accomplished Gurus in India. There is a huge new market for Indian music and dance education for these migrants and their children. Concurrently, there has been a growth spurt in the audience for all genres of Indian arts, including classical Indian music and dance. Finally, there has been a diversification of the interest from Carnatic music and Bharatanatyam, to other forms of music and dance from across India – Hindustani music, Kathak, Odissi and others.

In this chapter, we look at the numerous smaller Indian art institutions that have sprung up across the island in the last couple of decades, perhaps as a response to these trends. We also document the stories and memories of independent Singaporean artistes (outside of the four large institutions of SIFAS, Nrityalaya, Apsara's and TFA) and how they have grown and evolved over the years. The list of individuals and institutions, whose stories are covered in this chapter, is not meant to be exhaustive, but rather to give a glimpse of the tremendous institutional and individual artistic activity in both performance and education related spheres in the independent, or unaffiliated sector of the Indian performing arts field in Singapore. As we recount these stories, it is interesting to note the repeated interaction and sometimes central role of the 'Big 4' institutions in the formation and development of these numerous institutions. Indeed, it is a noteworthy characteristic of the Indian arts field in Singapore, that despite the sometimes competitive pressures (for audience, for students, for donors, for venues), there is a wonderful symbiotic relationship too that makes for a very vibrant ecosystem beneficial to all those who have a stake in the Indian arts in Singapore – the institutions themselves, artistes, teachers, students, parents and *rasikas* (or connoisseurs/fans). Teachers and students sometimes leave one institution to join another, teachers or students of the 'Big 4' institutions sometimes set up their own institutions, artistes from one organisation collaborate with or provide accompaniment to artistes from other institutions, and every once in a while, there is a

formal collaboration of several institutions in staging a performance, or raising funds for a cause.

This chapter is organised into three parts. The first part covers multi-disciplinary institutions, Prenavam Sangeetha, Alapana Arts, SYAMA and the Global Indian Cultural Centre. The second part covers individuals and single-Guru institutions focusing on music, Mirra Arts (founded by Radha Vijayan) and Dr. Bhagya Murthy. The third part covers independent dancers and dance Gurus, Vasanthi Kasinath, Usharani Maniam, Shanta Ratii and Dr. Siri Rama, and dance institutions, Bharathaanjali (V. Balakrishnan), Kala Peetham (Sitaravamma Sandrasegaren), Bharathaa Arts (Kesavan Sisters), Shruti Laya (Gayatri Sriram), Chitrakala Arts (Chitra Shankar), Chowk (Raka Maitra), Maya Dance Theatre (Kavitha Krishnan), and Aakash Ganga (Maalika Girish Panicker).

## MULTI-DISCIPLINARY INSTITUTIONS

### PRENAVAM SANGEETHA

Prenavam Sangeetha (earlier Prenavam Kala Sadhana) was established by the couple, M.R. Lenin and Rahana Lenin in 1999. Rahana Lenin is a Singaporean. M.R. Lenin was initiated into music at an early age by his spiritual Guru, Nithya Chaithanya Yati in Kerala. Both are graduates of the Swathi Thirunal Music College in Kerala, where Lenin completed both the four year Ganabhooshanam diploma and the three year Gana Praveena post-diploma programmes, while Rahana completed Ganabhooshanam and one year of the post-diploma programme. They arrived together in Singapore in 1991 after their wedding. Lenin first started teaching in the Narayana Gurukulam along with K. S. Ganapathy and Yazhpanam A. K. Karunakaran. In those early years, he found it difficult to get students motivated to learn and practise Carnatic music with the huge competing emphasis on academic studies by their parents. After three years, he left to set up an independent freelance practice, teaching at various community centres all over Singapore. In 1999, when he had about a hundred students, the Lenins set up Prenavam Kala Sadhana as a full-fledged arts institution with its own premises at the Selegie Complex, offering different disciplines such as violin by ex-SIFAS



teacher Kannan Packiarajah, veena by Gowri and Meghana, mridangam by Deenadayalan and Vignesh, Bharatanatyam by V. Balakrishnan and Sadhana Rajaram, tabla by Dattatreya, and of course, the Lenins themselves teaching Carnatic vocal. An annual system of exams was instituted.

In 2008, the Lenins decided that running a full-fledged arts institution was proving to be a complex administrative task, and so downsized back into a Carnatic vocal music institution, Prenavam Sangeetha. A unique characteristic of Prenavam is that every student is admitted, with the goal of preparing them for an *arangetram*, or a first solo concert. Also, uniquely, they do not admit every student who applies, but have an audition to screen out students who they think do not have the right motivation and aptitude to learn music. Despite the screening process, they now teach over 250 students at three centres in Singapore. They have examiners from Swathi Thirunal Music

College for the annual assessments, and have brought out a series of CDs covering the basic music exercises necessary for learning Carnatic music. Prenavam has conducted four vocal *arangetrams* so far. Rahana sees a very bright future for Carnatic music education in Singapore. She says, "Compared to the past, I think there is more interest now in traditional music. Students are also interested in mastering the basics. In about nine years, we are able to prepare them for an *arangetram*. When some of them move abroad for higher studies, they continue to learn from us via Skype." M.R. Lenin also conducts, teaches and composes for one of the only two Indian orchestras in secondary schools in Singapore, at the Unity Secondary School, where a multi-racial orchestra performs sitar, flute, violin, veena, harmonium, mridangam and tabla, and recently won the silver medal at the Singapore Youth Festival. The Lenins say that they find it challenging to get NAC funding for programmes, as they are considered a "private" institution.



M.R. Lenin and Rahana Lenin, founders of Prenavam Sangeetha





SYAMA- Shruthi Anand and Pratima Bellave at Civil Service Auditorium, 2015

## SYAMA

SYAMA (Society of the Youth for Artistic Music Appreciation) was instituted as an informal group in 2000, and registered as a society in 2004. Its founder, Ramkumar Vasudevan started learning the veena under Kamala Viswanathan, during his college days in Chennai studying Engineering. Within four years, he had started playing on All India Radio for short programmes. He arrived in Singapore in 1994 on a holiday, and while on vacation, managed to find a job. A fortuitous visit to a temple in 1998, where he witnessed a veena recital led him to discover SIFAS. He proceeded to get admission directly as a fourth year student under Jayalakshmi Sugumar. He recalls that SIFAS used to conduct in-house competitions for their own students, and winning the third prize in a competition at SIFAS was a great impetus and encouragement that eventually led to him getting the best student award in his fifth year at SIFAS. The arrival of R. Parthasarathy as veena teacher after his sixth year was a turning point in Ramkumar's life and raised the level of his understanding of the aesthetics of music production on the veena. He also has happy memories of his early years at SIFAS, "The musical environment at SIFAS was something special. Being able to listen to so many

concerts in that atmosphere led me to discover the nuances of mridangam playing and other basic things like the structure of a concert – what the different parts were like swaram and neraval." Another turning point was his initiative to form and manage the ensemble, SIFAS Octet, in 2000. They won the NAC's Indian Music Competition, playing a composition of R. Thyagarajan, a SIFAS tutor and son and disciple of flute maestro N. Ramani. That win led to a number of performances for the group. They also won the subsequent competition in 2002, this time including vocalists performing a composition of T.R. Vijayakumar, then SIFAS violin tutor and a disciple of the legendary violinist, late Lalgudi Jayaraman. Ramkumar proceeded to form a small group of young musicians including Aravind Ratnam Ganesh, Pavan Rangachar, Sai Vigneshwar, P.B. Madhavan, Srividya Sriram, S. Krishnan, N. Balasubramaniam, Usha Hariharan, Shanti Mahadevan and Satish Chandra Sista who met informally and practised music together to get ready to give monthly concerts. Sakti Vilas, a spiritual centre that had its own vegetarian restaurant on Serangoon Road, was very helpful in giving them rehearsal space and concert space at very nominal rates. In 2004, the NAC gave them



funding for conducting twelve concerts in twelve months. That was a great experience, with all the founding members giving concerts regularly. They realised then, that to make SYAMA a sustainable organisation, it had to be institutionalised.

So in 2006, an academy was set up, and it was also decided to scale up the performances to bigger events, performing at least once a year. Today, the academy is a thriving one, offering lessons in Carnatic vocal, harmonium and keyboard (by Kalakshetra graduate Karthik Balasubramaniam), Veena (by ex-SIFAS tutor Meenakshi Somasundaram), mridangam (by Harish Kannan), Hindustani vocal (by Mou Bhattacharyya) and tabla (by Supriyo Banerjee). On the performance side, SYAMA has staged a string of innovative programmes, by themselves and in collaboration with other local artistes and institutions. These include Thyagaraja's opera Prahlada Bhakti Vijayam, Dhvani, a musical festival that involved musical collaborations, Taj Mahal an audio-visual presentation of the emotions evoked by the monument, Devadasi and the Saint – a Bharatanatyam ballet depicting the times and travails of Bangalore Nagarathnamma, Daasaru, a dance drama based on Purandaradasa's perspective of Lord Krishna, and many others.



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## ALAPANA ARTS<sup>1</sup>

Alapana Arts was founded in 1999 by V. Raghuraman and Banumathy Raghuraman. Carnatic vocal and veena teacher and performer, Banumathy Raghuraman arrived in Singapore to join the Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society as a teacher in 1992. Daughter of the illustrious scholar, musician and composer, Dr. S. Ramanathan, she was a top ranking masters student from the renowned Universities of Madras and Delhi. She also received advanced training from the eminent violinist T. N. Krishnan, who was responsible for encouraging her, and recommending her as an instructor at SIFAS. Since 1999, Banumathy and her husband, V. Raghuraman, who is an experienced mridangam player and teacher, have been training students at Alapana Arts at various locations in Singapore. Their daughter, Lavanya Raghuraman (now based in the US), serves as the honorary head of the dance department. A Bharatanatyam and alumna of SIFAS, and currently a disciple of the Dhananjayans, Lavanya has performed several solo performances, and in 2009, she was awarded the Natya Chudra title by Kartik Fine Arts, a noted arts organisation in Chennai. She is also an accomplished musician, having won prizes at the bi-annual NAC Indian Music Competition for violin.

The institution offers multi-year courses of training, with systematised annual examinations, in veena, Carnatic vocal, violin, flute, mridangam, and Bharatanatyam. The institution recently secured its own permanent home in a Housing Development Board (HDB) shop space on Race Course road, in addition to teaching at satellite centres at different locations in Singapore. Over the years, Alapana Arts has published text books on Indian music and percussion, Sruti Manjari and Laya Manjari, and hosted concerts by leading Carnatic vocalists, such as P. Unnikrishnan, Sanjay Subrahmanyam, T. V. Sankaranarayanan, S. Sowmya, T. N. Seshagopalan, and Neyveli Santhanagopalan at their annual anniversary concert series, held in memory of the late Dr. S. Ramanathan. Their annual celebration of the Thyagaraja Aradhana as an homage to the saint composer is another noteworthy regular event. Over 150 Alapana Arts students took the standard level exam in 2014-15 across the various disciplines.

<sup>1</sup>The coverage of Alapana Arts is based on information available at the institution's website and personal knowledge of the author.



## GLOBAL INDIAN CULTURAL CENTRE (GICC)

Global Indian Cultural Centre (GICC) was started in 2004, soon after the establishment of the Global Indian Foundation which runs schools under the name Global Indian International School (GIIS) in many Asian countries including India, Japan, Vietnam, Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore. Though physically housed in the GIIS campus, GICC is a separate organisation from the school. The school itself is one of the first Indian international schools in Singapore, another outcome of the large numbers of Indian migrants who have moved to Singapore in the last two decades. The school offers Indian dance and music as part of its curriculum until Grade 5 in primary school. But GICC has full time professional teachers, and is more of a corporate social responsibility initiative of the Foundation with the mission to enable the Indian diaspora to remain connected with their traditional roots by imparting

a multitude of educational programmes in Indian languages, and yoga, and also in a variety of Indian classical music and dance disciplines. Enrolment is open to the entire Singaporean community.

The Indian music and dance disciplines offered currently are Carnatic vocal (taught by Ashwini Sathish and Srividya Sriram), violin (taught by Srividya Sriram and T.R. Vijayakumar), keyboard (taught by Tiruchy L. Saravanan and T.S. Lazar), flute (by Tiruchy L. Saravanan), Hindustani vocal (taught by Dr. Namita Mehta, Sucheta Bhattacharya and Rakhi Chatterjee), tabla (taught by Sarfraz Ahmed), and the dance forms of Bharatanatyam (taught by M.S. Srilakshmi Arun, Shobhinya Karthikeyan and Aarti Chidambaram), Kuchipudi (taught by Athira Venugopal), Odissi (taught by Jyoti Unni) and Kathak (taught by Irene Manual). Interestingly, some of these teachers were formerly associated with the 'Big 4' institutions (such as Tiruchy L. Saravanan



Music performance by GICC students at UTSAV 2013



and Sarfraz Ahmed with SIFAS). Latha Pradeep, the co-ordinator says, "We are also keen to tie up with Indian institutions such as Dr. L. Subramaniam's music school in Bengaluru to get our programmes certified. We are in talks with well-known Hindustani music institutions in India for suitable tie-ups. For the last nine years, we have been hosting Chennai-based musician Ashok Ramani's annual Papanasam Sivan music and dance competition. We thus are providing a platform for children to build their confidence and get exposure. Over a third of GICC's students are not GIIS students. Recently at a temple performance, our students were mistaken to be students of SIFAS, one of the premier cultural organisations in Singapore. For a young organisation like ours, that was a tremendous compliment! Now I am happy to say that there are a lot of invitations for GICC to perform at temple and community events." GICC started with around 30 students and now has around 500 students. Annual examinations are conducted in a rigorous manner, with highly qualified assessors including Saroja Srinath and Prema Hariharan for Carnatic music, Ravindra Parchure for Hindustani music and Dr. Siri Rama for dance. Interestingly, the centre tries to have the same assessors every year, so the students' progress can be monitored by the same examiners over the years.

GICC has also collaborated with SYAMA on three dance productions, with the GICC dance teachers doing all the choreography and also on an orchestral performance. Some of their students have also been performing regularly at the annual SIFAS Indian Classical Music and Dance festival. Rajiv Vasudeva, country director for GIIS, says, "We also get invited for a lot of government related functions, particularly during Indian Independence Day. For Singapore's National Day, very often, our students get invited to perform at dinner functions organised by Members of Parliament in their constituencies. This is part of our small effort to promote integration of immigrants with Singaporeans. I am especially proud of our yoga classes which are offered at a very nominal fee of \$12 for 12 classes and many of our students are Singaporean Chinese. And most of our teachers in that programme are volunteers from our network." GICC's future plans include starting orchestra training, especially in the singing of Tyagaraja's pancharatna kritis, at their annual aradhana event to which they invite local students and artistes, and also artistes from India.



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## MUSIC INSTITUTIONS AND INDEPENDENT MUSICIANS

### RADHA VIJAYAN

Radha Vijayan of Mirra Fine Arts had made several trips to Singapore starting in the seventies, as part of music orchestras, but his first compositional and conducting assignment was in 1992, at the invitation of the renowned dancer and choreographer Padma Subrahmanyam. She was choreographing a dance production Ritu Mahatmiyam, to be danced by performers from SIFAS, Nrityalaya and Apsaras Arts. She wanted him to notate the compositions, and to arrange the music orchestra which comprised Indian, Chinese and Malay instrumentalists for two performances at the Victoria Theatre. K.P. Bhaskar of Nrityalaya was so impressed with Vijayan's talents, that he asked him if he would be interested in returning to Singapore on a full time basis. At that time, Vijayan was doing very well for himself in the Tamil movie industry in Chennai. He had been trained in veena by R. Pichumani, but had a greater inclination for western music, which he learnt from masters such as guitar maestro Philips and from Dhanaraj master who taught him the basics of piano playing. As an apprentice to these masters, Vijayan picked up the art of making music arrangements, and also began playing regularly in recordings. His first ever recording was as a lead guitarist for the music director Subbiah Naidu for the M.G. Ramachandran starrer Aasai Mugham. He has fond memories of his association



with the legendary composer Ilaiyaraja, “I knew Ilaiyaraja before he became a guitarist. He used to play the harmonium and we had a music group called Star Links, in which he used to play the harmonium and the accordion.” All this was while the young Vijayan was working full time at Indian Organic Chemicals, in their polyester fiber manufacturing, a job more consonant with his basic gold medal winning degree in Textiles Engineering. But music remained his passion and his first love. At age 26, after his wedding, when his first daughter was born, he gave up his corporate career to enter into the music industry full time.

In the early 1990s, the movie music industry was very competitive and when he had the chance to move to Singapore with Bhaskar's offer, Vijayan enthusiastically took it up. He worked for almost ten years with Nrityalaya, composing music for a dance production Om Muruga, produced for Thai Pusam, based on Melakartha ragas, with Santha Bhaskar composing the jathis. He also worked on different productions based on stories from the Panchatantra with Ghanavenothan Retnam, Aravinth Kumarasamy and him, each creating music for an episode. “For the first time ever, I played guitar in flamenco style for a Bharatanatyam performance. I converted Santha Bhaskar's jathis into Western rhythms. It was so interesting!” he says. Another early innovation was his starting a choir under the guidance of K. P. Bhaskar,

performing Subrahmanya Bharatiyar songs, with singers such as Shankar Rajan, Saradha Shankar, Bhagya Murthy, Vigneswari, Sathyalingam, and Ramachandran at an a cappella performance at the DBS auditorium in 1992. It later developed into a 40 member choir, and Vijayan is now on the Advisory board of the Singapore Choral Development Secretariat. But his primary job at Nrityalaya was teaching music – innovatively teaching students to read Western musical notation in Carnatic notation style and insisting that they learn to notate every piece of music, even just one rhythmic cycle, either in Western or in Carnatic style. In 2000, Vijayan wanted to move to focus exclusively on Western music, which is when, with Bhaskar's permission and blessings, he started Mirra Fine Arts, first in Fortune Centre on Middle Road, and now in Jurong, where he currently trains over 140 students in keyboard and guitar, preparing them for the Trinity College examinations.

### DR. BHAGYA MURTHY

Dr. Bhagya Murthy is an institution by herself in Singapore, especially in the field of singing for dance programmes. Already a graded artiste in Bengaluru who had the honour of singing alongside greats like R. K. Srikantan, she admits feeling completely lost when she arrived in Singapore in 1979, not knowing Tamil, not being able to understand Singlish, and having no musical network. It all changed when a move from her Ang Mo Kio residence to Katong in 1981 meant that she was close to the then SIFAS campus on Branksome Road. She was initiated into the art of singing (and in Tamil no less) for dance by the ex-Kalakshetra duo of SIFAS dance teacher K. Vijayalakshmi and mridangam maestro Karaikudi Krishnamurthy. She remembers with a chuckle, “The dancer Shubhangini's arangetram, was also my arangetram! And in those days, we would practise for months for an arangetram.” There was no looking back after that initiation.

Since then, she has sung in over 300 arangetrams in Singapore, accompanied dance programmes in the US, UK, Cambodia, Australia, Malaysia and India and lent her voice to numerous group dance productions, contemporary dance recitals, and large dance dramas. She is also grateful to the Sathyalingams of Apsaras Arts for being a great source of encouragement and giving her many



Radha Vijayan, guitar and keyboard player and teacher and founder of Mirra Arts



Dr. Bhagya Murthy, Carnatic vocalist

opportunities to sing for dance, including her first overseas arangetram in Australia for one of their students. Bhagya has also been closely associated with the Tamil media, starting in the late 1980s, singing a song, Kannanethaan composed by Re. Shanmugam for Radio Singapore, following which she was invited by Singapore Broadcasting Corporation to sing on television. She has sung numerous times on local broadcast media and is also often invited to judge talent competitions.

Bhagya was also a pioneering member of the Singapore Indian Orchestra and Choir. A prolific teacher, she has taught hundreds of students at Nrityalaya, and also independently. At Nrityalaya, she remembers that in one particular year, they had an arangetram every month! K.P. Bhaskar of Nrityalaya also helped her organise the staging of the first ever Kannada play in Singapore. Bhagya feels Singapore has really helped her develop as a musician. In particular, she is thankful for the many opportunities to interact with and learn from maestros. She says, "In India, it is very difficult to get quality time with eminent musicians. In Singapore, I was very fortunate to meet and learn from musicians like the late Dr. M.L. Vasanthakumari, Dr. M. Balamuralikrishna, the late L. Vaidyanathan, Dr. L' Subramanian and Maharajapuram Santhanam. M.L.V. Amma's words of praise still linger in my ears - Unnodiya shaareeram romba nalla irukku; God bless you! (your voice has such strength and resonance)." Bhagya is also very proud of some of her ex-students who have gone to

great heights in both classical and light music. In particular, Saraswathi Thayalan, whom she initiated into music and whose foundations she laid, went on to Chennai for advanced training under the musicologist S. Rajeshwari and at Kalakshetra, and today, runs her own music school, Lahari in Singapore. Priya Raman, another student is now an established playback singer in Bengaluru, singing alongside film music greats like Hariharan and S. P. Balasubramaniam. As a native Kannada speaker, Bhagya had to struggle to master the Tamil language after coming to Singapore, but she managed to learn it so well, that she was called on to sing the invocatory pieces for a Tamil conference, with an attendance of Tamil poets and scholars from around the world. Other happy memories that Bhagya has about her musical life in Singapore include her experiments in dance accompaniment, especially with Raka Maitra, Jayanthi Siva and Dr. Siri Rama, who encouraged her to explore new facets of free form singing in contemporary dance productions. She also takes special pride in the annual Purandaradasa Day that she organises as homage to the composer considered the grandfather of Carnatic music education. Recently, Bhagya was awarded an honorary doctorate from a Sri Lankan University. She has also been honoured with titles of Singai Gamma, Sangeetha Kala Nipuna and Gaana Kogile.

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## INDEPENDENT DANCERS AND DANCE TEACHERS AND INSTITUTIONS

### VASANTHA KASINATH

Vasantha Kasinath started training in dance in India, at a very early age. She has learnt from many renowned Gurus including P. R. Viswanathan, Mylapore Gouri Ammal, Tanjore Venkattu Nattuvanar, Pathakudi Ramasamy, S. K. Dandayuthapani Pillai and Uday Shankar. She performed her arangetram at the age of twelve. As a member of the Uday Shankar dance troupe, she went on Indian government sponsored performance tours to over fifty cities across the world. About significant memories in her distinguished dance career in Singapore, some stand out. She says, "I remember dancing at the official opening ceremony for Singapore television in 1963. Another great experience was choreographing almost 70 students in a performance in celebration of Singapore's silver jubilee in 1990. Also special was being chosen to represent Singapore at parades and airport openings in the Japanese town of Osaka." While she currently has over fifty students, Vasantha has taught over three thousand students over the years, in schools, junior colleges and as an independent dance instructor. She has conducted fourteen arangetram performances for her long term disciples thus far. Vasantha is delighted with the current status of Bharatanatyam nationwide. "Tremendous encouragement is given in all spheres for the art of Bharatanatyam to spread across the country and to all communities. The annual SYF Dance Competition for schools has made Bharatanatyam the preferred art form among Malay and Chinese students too. Almost all community centres in different parts of Singapore offer space for Bharatanatyam teachers to conduct their regular classes for a very nominal fee. Temples promote the art in a big way by conducting special programmes for all the traditional Hindu festivals. That is a great encouragement for the Gurus to showcase their students' talents and to inspire students to learn and perform better," Vasantha says. She is also very sanguine about the future. "With so many different styles of Bharatanatyam taught in different schools in Singapore, I think the future is very good for Bharatanatyam in Singapore. There is encouragement to produce creative performances



Vasantha Kasinath, Bharatanatyam dancer , choreographer and teacher

with new ideas that relate to the mass audiences. I am happy that so many arangetrams are being held on a regular basis with the full support of teachers and parents." In 2013, Vasantha was honoured with the "Natya Aacharyamani" award in recognition of her teaching efforts by Apsaras Arts.





## USHARANI MANIAM

Usharani Maniam is a veteran dancer and dance teacher of the local dance scene in Singapore. She started learning at the age of four at Nrityalaya and performed her arangetram at the age of 14. Among her most distinct memories are being presented a gold medal as a child prodigy, by the Chief Minister of Penang, and being awarded the title “Natya Thilaga” (Jewel of Dancers) in 1971 by the Indian Movie News Club.

She has wonderful memories of her experience in the Singapore National Dance Company, and of performing to rave reviews in Australia and Russia. Also significantly, she was selected by the then Tourism Promotion Board to be an ambassador of the arts, and she travelled to sponsored dance tours of Malaysia, Holland, France, Germany and the US between 1973 and 1980.

Over the years, Usharani has taught over three hundred students, and more than a tenth of them have performed arangetrams, which is a remarkable achievement for a dance teacher. She has also been training students in numerous schools and junior colleges to gold level performances at the

Singapore Youth Festivals. Her daughter, Sanjana Subramaniam, completed her arangetram in 2000 and now runs her own school in New Jersey in the US. Many of her students have also become full-fledged teachers in their own right, teaching at temples and community clubs across Singapore. Usharani has been recognised by the ‘Big 4’ institutions in the form of titles such as “Nritya Kala Nipuna” from Nrityalaya Aesthetics Society in 1995, and “Natya Aacharyamani”, by Apsaras Arts in 2013.

Talking about the current Indian dance scene in Singapore, Usharani says, “I see a lot more attempt at fusion in Indian dance today. And yet, classical Indian dance is still thriving with the setting up of so many more schools. Also, there is increased interaction with artistes from India who often come to Singapore to conduct workshops and talk at seminars.” She is a little rueful about the support from the media as compared to the past. “The support for Bharatanatyam continues to be strong from schools, community centres and temples. However, Bharatanatyam used to be featured significantly on local television, but that is no longer the case these days.”



Usharani Maniam (third from left), Bharatanatyam dancer, flanked by her students

## SHANTA RATII

Shanta Ratii is a multi-disciplinary dancer, trained in Bharatanatyam, Kuchipudi and Kathakali under many Gurus such as Adyar Lakshman, Kalanidhi Narayanan, Oyar Govinda Pillai, Raja and Radha Reddy, Vempati Chinna Satyam, K.P. Bhaskar, Santha Bhaskar and Neila Sathyalingam. She remembers the vibrant dance scene on television at the age of twelve under the direction of people such as E.S.J. Chandran and Manickam Pakkirisamy who would produce a lot of variety shows on television which always included dance. Shanta remembers, "In those days, we would do everything from scratch. It is not like today when we can buy everything on quick trips to Chennai. We would design thalai saman (head-dress and jewellery) and costumes and get them made on a just-in-time basis for these television shows which would sometimes happen on a twice-a-month basis." The young Shanta was fascinated by all forms of music and dance, including Chinese opera and street performances of wayang, which she would get a glimpse of while travelling by car. Her father noticed her secretly watching some of these performances on television too, and thought she might enjoy learning Kathakali. Several Malayalees, under the direction of K.P. Bhaskar had organised a Kathakali yogam, and Shanta was among the very few girls who learnt Kathakali at this yogam. At a young age, she also started teaching dance to girls at Narayana Mission and she and her students got multiple opportunities to perform at the then Kerala Association's cultural events and other community celebrations like Onam. In the seventies, Shanta had the grand opportunity of being invited to be part of the National Dance Company which performed around the world. She says, "We were a fantastic group, so much camaraderie, so much discipline. And it was run like a professional company. Madhavi Krishnan, the first Indian Cultural Medallion winner was there, and five or six other dancers. We had a live orchestra with Ramachandran singing, Shanmugam (son of veteran mridangist M.V. Gurusamy) playing mridangam, and Rajeshwari on the violin. Our dances would depict festivals like Thaipusam and Deepavali. And we always got a standing ovation."

In 1984, after her wedding, Shanta migrated to Baghdad in Iraq, where she had barely any

opportunities to dance, and was mainly doing social work centred around the welfare of the Oberoi hotel workers. But she did meet Raja and Radha Reddy, who strongly encouraged her to learn Kuchipudi. Later in 1987, when she moved to Delhi, the Reddys were in dire need of a replacement for a character in their dance production, and they asked Shanta to fill in – and she learnt the part and performed it in a very short time. And later, when she had health issues, and was looking to revive her dance career as a way of breaking out of that low period in her life, with a Kuchipudi performance, the owner of the Oberoi chain of hotels stepped in and offered to present her in a dance performance as soon as she was ready! And that first performance with Raja Reddy conducting the orchestra got her some of the best reviews she has ever received. Later she moved to Chennai to learn from Vempati Chinna Satyam in a Gurukulam setting. Subsequent years saw her travelling and living in various parts of the world including Malaysia, New York, Mumbai and London, until she returned to Singapore in



Shanta Ratii, Bharatanatyam, Kuchipudi and Kathakali dancer





2009. These travels enabled her to learn other art forms such as pottery, television production and film-making even while it was difficult to maintain a full time dance performing career.

On her return to Singapore, Shanta notices the invaluable role played now by the NAC in nurturing the arts. She is also appreciative of the growing institutionalisation of the arts in terms of major organisations and structured exams, but she also feels that the magic of learning in a Gurukulam is somehow lost, and wonders if these institutions will be able to produce star performers. “There is something in the magic of cleaning the prayer room of your Guru. Something undefinable happens and enters into your very soul. Travelling with your Guru, applying oil to your Guru’s knee, dancing in small villages – these experiences are difficult to describe. In institutions, you can learn technique and learn it well. But I cannot help feeling something is also lost in this institutionalisation.” She has started teaching Kuchipudi to a handful of students, but admits that she finds it tough to maintain a performing career dancing around the world, and to also do justice to these students.



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## DR. SIRI RAMA

Dr. Siri Rama is an independent Bharatanatyam and Kuchipudi dancer, choreographer and teacher. She arrived in Singapore in 2000, after having lived for several years in Hong Kong and the US. Prior to her Singapore arrival, she was the first overseas dance instructor at Pandit Hariprasad Chaurasia’s institution, Vrindaban in Hong Kong. She also took advantage of her tenure in Hong Kong to complete a PhD in the Fine Arts at the University of Hong Kong, writing a thesis on the dance sculptures of Belur and Halebid temples. In Singapore, she was initially a dance instructor at Alapana Arts, and has choreographed and presented three major multi-cultural dance-drama productions for the Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society. Two of these were based on Sanskrit compositions of the renowned scholar, the late Professor V. Subramaniam, on Buddhist themes, the Fifth Lotus (about five women whose lives were affected by the Buddha) and Maya Dhvani (an enactment of a Jataka tale) and the third was Rama Katha, the Hindi version of the Ramayana composed by the saint poet Tulsidas, a commission of SIFAS for its sixtieth anniversary celebrations in 2009. Three significant features of all these productions were the joint participation of dancers from the ‘Big 4’ (from SIFAS, TFA and independent dancers) and from Mumbai, collaboration with Malay and Chinese dancers, and the subtitling of the lyrics in English and Mandarin, enabling a wide swathe of the audience, across language groups in Singapore, to appreciate the finer nuances of the dance-dramas. Recalling her early years in Singapore, Siri says, “After spending many years in Hong Kong, where language was an issue in being able to communicate with local artistes, it was fascinating to move to Singapore. Singapore is a wonderful country for Indian dancers to thrive in, especially if you are interested in Asian themes and working with artistes from the other Asian genres. First, there is a huge amount of Indian classical singing and instrumental musical talent, which makes it easy to put together an outstanding orchestra. Then, there is generous funding from the National Arts Council and charitable bodies like the Lee and Shaw Foundations. English is spoken widely among the Malay and Chinese communities of artistes too, making it easy to collaborate on projects together. And finally, there is the resonance of themes and motifs like the Ramayana, the lotus,



Buddhism, which makes it easy to combine our artistic visions across choreographers from different genres. I have enjoyed a close working relationship with Madam Som Said of Sri Warisan Som Said Performing Arts and Dr. Chua Soo Pong, the erstwhile director of the Chinese Opera Institute, and I have learnt so much from both these fine artistes.” Other collaborative experiences of Siri’s in Singapore include themed performances “Samvaada”, with Odissi dancer Jyoti Unni, “Silk Roots”, about pan Asian stories of silk fabric, and artistic direction of the contemporary dance recitals “Borobudur Re-visited” and “Rhy-Morphs”, by students of the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, where Siri has taught Asian dance courses. The proximity of Singapore to India, has also meant that unlike Indian diaspora dancers in other parts of the world, Siri has been able to continue to supervise the growth and development of senior students at her Mumbai institution, Kanaka Sabha Centre for the Performing Arts. Her deep involvement with the Singapore chapter of the World Dance Alliance Asia Pacific, of which she is currently a second term President, and the support of the NAC, enabled her to travel to conferences in Delhi, and Taiwan, which further led to her ability to collaborate with a

Taiwanese dance troupe for multiple performances in India in 2014. Siri has conducted five dance arangetrams of Singaporean students, and fifteen in all across her dance teaching career in three countries.

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Dr.Siri Rama, Bharatanatyam and Kuchipudi dancer , choreographer and teacher, creating a Merlion image on stage with Rangoli Artiste Vijaya Mohan for GOPIO 2010



## INDEPENDENT DANCE INSTITUTIONS

### BHARATHAANJALI

Bharathananjali's founder V. Balakrishnan was fascinated by dance as a child, entranced by the magic of dance on the silver screen by well known danseuses like Padmini, Ragini, Kumari Kamala, and Vyjayanthimala Bali. But in the 1950s, there was a taboo on males taking up dance, so he was never given a chance to learn. He would also see dances in the temples, during Navarathiri and other functions, not always pure classical dance, but sometimes dances to film songs. They all left an indelible impression on his mind. When he later took a job as a script assistant at Radio Television Singapore (now Mediacorp) in 1976, a year later, he met his first Bharatanatyam Guru, Balagopalan, who was then a SIFAS dance tutor, in the course of his television work. He learned with him for a year before Balagopalan left in 1978. In 1980, at the age of 25, he joined Kala Mandhir (now TFA) as a student and learnt for six years. In the same institution he learned Carnatic music under late K.S.Ganapathy, and later, under Nageswaran. But he had a burning desire to be a solo dancer, so in 1986, he joined Apsaras Arts where he was taught by Neila Sathyalingam. At the same time, he also joined the People's Association dance troupe. He remembers, "Neila Mami brought out the best in me. She gave me a lot of opportunities. On the very second day of class, she taught me Kanda Alarippu; I didn't even know what *kanda* meant! It is because of her blessings that I am what I am today. I learnt my first varnam, *Swami Naan Unthan Adimai* in Raga Nattaikurinji, a varnam I just performed at the Natyanjali festival 2015 in Chidambaram." Balakrishnan performed many roles in all Apsara's productions and brought in more male dancers, like Charles, Moorthy and Dinahar.

At the same time Balakrishnan started conducting his own first class at the Anson CC, and later at Radin Mas, Thomson, and finally at Bishan North CC and Jurong Spring Community Club. In 1990, he began calling his classes Bharathananjali.

The desire for becoming a solo dancer was still very strong, so Balakrishnan took it upon himself to learn all aspects of dance – he learnt nattuvangam



V. Balakrishnan, Bharatanatyam dancer and media person, and founder of Bharathananjali

as a special student of Karaikudi Krishnamurthy in SIFAS, took Thevaram classes, and learnt Sanskrit from Swami Raghunand at Sri Ramakrishna Mission. In 1987, Balakrishnan had an opportunity to tour the world with the Singapore Tourism Board's promotional programme, for which he was chosen after an audition. He danced solo as well as in group performances in Europe, Australia and many parts of Asia. In 1996, he performed in India for the first time, performing Surprise Singapore at the Music Academy, and Navarathiri Nayaki at the Kalakshetra auditorium.

In 1993, he did his first solo, Bharathanjali, choreographing it entirely himself, with the late Sathyalingam and M.R. Lenin singing for him. Since then, Balakrishnan has presented many thematic solo performances such as Prathishta, Aadum Vel, Uma, Shuka Vaani and Sivam Sivakaram.

In 2007, Balakrishnan resigned from his job, and formally registered Bharathanjali as an institution. Classes are conducted in Bharatanatyam and in Carnatic music, and there are annual exams with external examiners. Bharathanjali has staged two arangetrams so far. Balakrishnan is very particular about whom he allows to stage an arangetram performance. Another unusual aspect of his solo dance career, is that he has made it a point to always dance with a live orchestra, even for temple programmes. He is a regular invitee at two temples, Sri Mariamman Temple and Sri Krishnan Temple, both of which appreciate that he always arranges live music for his dance recitals.

Professor Hari Krishnan of the Wesleyan University has also been a great supporter of Balakrishnan and encouraged him to write his own compositions. His compositions include varnams on Harihara (in Vachaspati raga), Muruga (in Karaharapriya Raga), Durga (in Todi raga) and the latest on the Divine Parrot (Shuka Vaani). The first two had music set by T. S. Lazar and the next two by G. Manikantan. Balakrishnan has also written many compositions for Ajith Bhaskaran Dass's Suvarna Fine Arts organisation in Johor Bahru (Malaysia) including a varnam on Fire, two full length productions Vismaya Vriksha and Bhoomi Pranam, and several songs for Anarkali and Shakunthalam.

Balakrishnan was awarded the title of Nritya Sahitya Choodamani by Suvarna Fine Arts in 2013, and in 2014, he was given the title of Natya Aachaarya Mani by Dance India Asia Pacific and Apsara's Arts. Earlier, he was awarded the titles of Bharatha Kalaimani by Apsaras Arts in 1997, Bharata Thilakam by Prenavam Kala Sadhana in 2002 and Natya Kala Nipuna by Nrityalaya in 2005. As he approaches 60 this year, Balakrishnan continues to go strong in his performing career, with three productions planned for this year. While he owes a lot to his many illustrious Gurus in dance, it is creditable that he has managed to educate

himself on so many aspects of Bharatanatyam, and that he has continuously tried to learn from every opportunity he received.



Neila Mami brought out the best in me. She gave me a lot of opportunities. ... It is because of her blessings that I am what I am today.



### KALA PEETHAM

Kala Peetham's founder Sitaravamma Sandrasegaren grew up in Vijayawada, India, as a neighbour of the highly accomplished singer, composer and dance Guru Seetharama Sharma. She had her initial lessons in music from him, and when he moved to Chennai to become a faculty member at Kalakshetra, he encouraged her to continue her studies there, from age seven onwards. After his wife moved to the Kalakshetra campus, Sitaravamma was invited to stay at his house, rather than in the hostel, almost as his adopted daughter. She completed her post graduate training, at the very young age of 16 and has the happy memory of being given the diploma by the legendary Tamil composer, Papanasam Sivan. She grew up in this art-filled environment, in a dance dress all day, being called in for a dance demonstration here, to teach a class there, to practise, to rehearse, to teach senior students, playing various roles in the Kalakshetra productions staged across India and around the world. While she had no formal arangetram as such, she was getting invited to many sabhas like Rasika Ranjani Sabha and Music Academy to give solo recitals, even personally receiving a Kasi Malai from the late Tamil superstar and Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M. G. Ramachandran at one of these recitals. While at Kalakshetra, Sitaravamma also learnt some Kuchipudi items from Vempati Chinna Satyam. Soon after completing her diploma, she was appointed to a teaching post at Kalakshetra, where she would mainly teach senior and post graduate students. After being hesitant to play negative roles like Surpanakha,





but being encouraged by Rukmini Devi Arundale to expand her repertoire of roles, there was no looking back and she eventually started performing many leading roles in their dance productions. Arundale was unhappy to lose her, after ten years as a tutor at Kalakshetra, since she was a key teacher and a central character in many dance productions. But her wedding into a Mauritius based family led her to migrate to Mauritius. Her performing and teaching career also ground to a halt as she took up an arts advisory role in the Mauritius government. But she did have some Japanese students in Kalakshetra, and in the early nineties, she once flew to Japan to perform with her Japanese student, Yumiko Tanaka and her German student Anjali Sriram.

On the way back to Mauritius, she stopped over in Singapore, which she had heard a lot about, since so many Kalakshetra graduates had become teachers at SIFAS over the years and she had heard fascinating stories about the country. She expressed a desire to perform in Singapore to Seetharama Sharma, who passed her vita to A. Sachithananthan at SIFAS. Happily SIFAS was looking to start teaching Kuchipudi, so she was recruited first as a Kuchipudi teacher, and stayed on for many years

as a Bharatanatyam teacher. She was delighted to have the company of her junior at Kalakshetra, Shanta Ponnudurai at SIFAS, and at the peak, had over 120 students at SIFAS, conducting over thirty arangements. She staged many productions including Sanghamitra, Raga Dhvani, Andal Charitram, and Harihararpanam. She has some very fond memories of her teaching stint for ten years in SIFAS, and she felt she always had the full support of the management, her colleagues and many appreciative students. Sitaravamma was reluctant to move out of SIFAS, but as her son wanted to stay on in Singapore for his higher studies, it was more conducive to move out and to set up a branch of Kala Peetham, an institution founded by Seetharama Sharma with branches in many parts of the world. Today, she leads a very contented life as a permanent resident in Singapore, grateful for the love and affection she has received from so many students, for the opportunity to spread her art as a cultural ambassador, as wished for by Rukmini Devi and for never having to compromise on the basic artistic and spiritual values she imbibed at Kalakshetra. She has 80 to 100 students currently, with some ex-students coming back to her to learn new items, on a part time basis as and when they visit Singapore from abroad.



Sitaravamma Sandrasegaren, founder of Kala Peetham, Bharatanatyam dancer and teacher, with Lavanya Ramesh, Bharatanatyam dancer and Carnatic vocalist



Suganthi Kumaraguru, Bharatanatyam dancer and co-founder of Bharathaa Arts



Jeyanthi Balasubramaniam, Bharatanatyam dancer and co-founder of Bharathaa Arts

## BHARATHAA ARTS

Bharathaa Arts' founders Suganthi Kumaraguru and Jeyanthi Balasubramaniam (or the Kesavan sisters as they are popularly known) had their initial training in Bharatanatyam under Jayalakshmi Menon in the Kalakshetra style for ten years. In 1982, they joined Apsaras Arts under the direction of Neila Sathyalingham and participated in numerous productions of the institution. They had their formal arangetram in 1984. Later, they received post-arangetram training under renowned ex-Kalakshetra teachers and performances such as late Krishnaveni Lakshmanan, late Adyar K. Lakshman and the Dhananjayans. They began teaching soon after their arangetram, first as teachers at Apsaras Arts and later, in their own institution Bharathaa Arts. The Kesavan sisters currently have over a hundred students, and over the years, they have conducted fifteen arangetrams. Their students have performed across many

countries in Europe and Asia. Jeyanthi says "Dancing is my passion. But as dance teachers, we have the opportunity to see our students grow and maximise their potential. Knowing that part of this was achieved through our love, guidance and nurturing, makes our hearts feel joyful and contented." The consistent creative output of the Kesavan sisters over the years led to their being awarded the "Bharathaa Kalaimanigal" title in 2002 by their own Gurus at Apsaras Arts. Other noteworthy recognitions include, most significantly, the "Artistic Excellence" award received from the then President S.R. Nathan in 2000, and the title "Natya Chudar" awarded in 2006 by Indian Activity Executive Committee of Bishan Community Club. The Kesavan sisters have performed widely in India too, at important festivals and temple events, and have also been invited to perform in Australia, China and Indonesia.





## SHRUTI LAYA

Shruti Laya's founder Gayatri Sriram first arrived in Singapore in 1993, just out of University and as a fairly novice dancer, disciple of Kalakshetra trained Minal Prabhu. She joined SIFAS under the tutelage of Shanta Ponnudurai, who gave her many opportunities to perform. She has distinct memories of that early period of her life in Singapore, "It was a huge deal to have a Kalakshetra sort of platform available in Singapore and especially that generation, because they were all seniors, absolute stalwarts." Gayatri left for Chennai for a year, and then returned in 1996, and continued training with Shanta Ponnudurai. It was around then that she decided that dance would be her full time career. When Ponnudurai left for Canada, Gayatri continued studying and performing under the supervision of another Kalakshetra graduate, Balagurunathan. Gayatri sees her performance Purush Prakriti with Balagurunathan at the opening of Kalaa Utsavam at the Esplanade as a major turning point in her dance career, as it opened up opportunities provided by the event management company Teamworks, to perform at the Nehru Centre, in London with Meenakshi Srinivasan, who was another Bharatanatyam dancer who had newly arrived in Singapore. Her first big solo in Singapore was the production of Panchakanya in 2006, which she also got opportunities to perform in India. This was followed by several other productions over the years, Ramakatha, Seetha Swagatam, Hridayam, and Mukti Marga, all of which have had several more showings in the Chennai season and in several European cities. A very significant recognition came from the Krishna Gana Sabha in 2013, in the form of the Rukmini Devi Arundale award. In early 2000, Gayatri established Shruti Laya as a dance institution dedicated to teaching only those students seriously interested in dance beyond a hobby. Gayatri says, "You know how much effort it takes to teach. And if they are not going to make something of themselves, then it's really not worth the effort. Unless they are planning to take it side by side with studies, which is the way we all learnt, it's not worth it." Gayatri is happy that many of her students, Tanvi, Diya, Aditi, and Meenakshi have all become serious dancers, and are regularly winning awards in the Chennai season.

A few years ago, Gayatri began organising what has



Gayatri Sriram, Bharatanatyam dancer and founder of Shruti Laya

now become an annual and much awaited event, the Samarpana dance festival. She says the main objective of the festival is to give a platform to young artistes, both here in Singapore and in India. So she makes it a point, to have organisers, critics, scholars present too at the festival, as the networking and recognition that can happen from close encounters with such significant individuals can do wonders for a junior dancer – not just in confidence, but also in actual concert opportunities in India. She has also opened a chapter of Samarpana in Bengaluru. Gayatri has also been deeply involved with the Republic Polytechnic and has done a lot of productions with Zaini Tahir, including Moksha Mudra. Her future plans include trying to get a foreign artiste to do a residency, to teach for three weeks and then to put up a performance, and to work with the People's Association Indian Orchestra and Choir to perform both in India and here. She is hopeful that the Samarpana festival will grow into a ten day festival.



Gayatri also sees Singapore as providing a very conducive environment for Indian dance relative to most cities in India, "There is enough place for everyone to survive, to dance, to perform, to create. The government is so wonderfully giving. The NAC is always there. You organise an appointment, they are there to meet you, they are there to help you, how to apply for a grant, what you should do. It's been incredible. If you have the talent and merit, things fall into place. It is such a meritocratic society."

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It was a huge deal to have a Kalakshetra sort of platform available in Singapore (at SIFAS) and especially that generation, because they were all seniors, absolute stalwarts.

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### CHITRAKALA ARTS

The founder of Chitrakala Arts, Chitra Shankar hails from Delhi originally. She was trained in Bharatanatyam by Saroja Vaidyanathan and in Odissi by the late Hare Krishna Behera and Madhavi Mudgal. She has vivid memories of the dance scene in Singapore, when she arrived in 1998, "When I first came to Singapore, there were a couple of Kathak dancers, a few local Singaporeans too. But surprisingly none practising Odissi. There had been someone earlier who had returned to India and the Temple of Fine Arts group had moved to Malaysia along with their Swamiji. So it was like starting from scratch." Her school, Chitrakala Arts, specialising in Odissi and Bharatanatyam has grown from one student in 1998 to over ninety students in 2015, and is completely self-sustaining without any external support. Among her proudest achievements in Singapore, is that Chitrakala Arts is the first school here to have trained Chinese and Japanese students in Odissi to performance level. Chitra is also happy that she was instrumental in introducing Odissi to the local community through

numerous performances at community centres, temples, and at the Singapore Youth Festival competitions. Chitra says, "In fact, we were the first school in more than 15 years to have an Odissi manchapravesh (or graduating performance) in 2010, by a Singaporean." In 2014, she was awarded Ambassador of Odissi by Odissi International,



Chitra Shankar, Bharatanatyam and Odissi dancer and founder of Chitrakala Arts



Bhubaneswar for her efforts in promoting Odissi in the SEA region. Chitra has benefited tremendously from the Indian cultural eco-system pillared by the 'Big 4' institutions. "One person I would like to mention here who has guided me and was a pillar of support in my initial years in Singapore is none other than Mrs. Neila Sathyalingam or Mami as we dearly call her. Back then, PA used to organise a lot of community events and I have done several shows for them. I consider that a big support as it gave me and my students a platform to perform. SIOC and its conductor Mrs Lalitha Vaidyanathan have also given me several opportunities to collaborate with them including a tour of Mexico in 2005. SIFAS has had its role to play too; I was invited to perform at their first annual festival in 2003 and also for some of their collaborative performances. I should make a special mention of the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA), where I have been teaching since 2002." Chitra is hopeful about the future of the Singapore dance scene in Singapore. "Now we hear and see new names of new Bharatanatyam dancers coming up every other day. I believe that the future of Odissi in Singapore is also very bright. Many of my students are willing to take it forward and pursue it seriously."

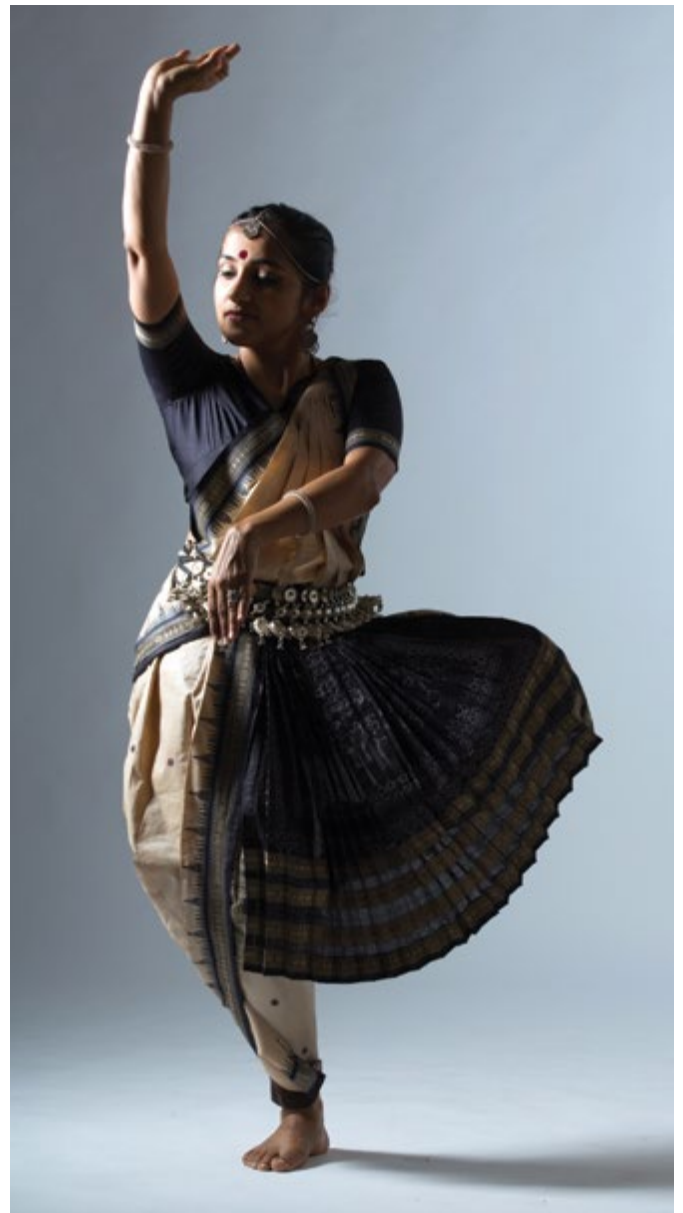


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## RAKA MAITRA

Raka Maitra, founder of Chowk, received training in Odissi under Madhavi Mudgal and has attended advanced workshops with Kelucharan Mahapatra. She also studied Serraiella Chhau under Sashadhar Acharya. But she came to Singapore in 2004 at a time in her career when she was already moving away from traditional Odissi towards contemporary dance. Raka became an associate artiste at the Substation and started creating contemporary dance works for staging at the Substation. Some of her work caught the attention of some NUS students who pushed her to start teaching Odissi. So while Raka had come to Singapore thinking that she wanted to start something new in a new country



Raka Maitra, founder of Chowk

of residence, and had never imagined she would teach Odissi, she could not but respond to the needs of these students who were so passionate about the art form. In 2010, the Substation changed its leadership and the new rules forced out the associate artistes. Raka's Odissi class had grown to 25 students and led her, in a happy discovery to find a studio space in Emily Hill. These students were also deeply committed and indeed initiated to move to incorporate more formally into an institution, Chowk. Raka always starts training students, even for her contemporary dance students, with the rigour and discipline associated with the classical form of Odissi. She is delighted that one of her first students, Kiran Kumar, a mechanical engineering scholarship student at NUS, is now back in Chowk, working full time as associate artistic director. Raka strongly feels that all dancers in Singapore, but especially Indian dancers, need to work hard to create an environment in which dance performance is a paid occupation. She discourages her students from performing in any festival or event in which there is not a reasonable payment. Raka says "Western contemporary dancers get paid. Theatre artistes get paid. Indian dance seems to be the only field of performing arts in which dancers are expected to perform for free. This must change. I will feel like we have achieved something only when that starts happening, when dancers begin to see this profession as a viable alternative to becoming accountants and managers."

Over the years, Chowk has produced many dance works, and most recently, was commissioned to perform a new work, *Blind Age* at the 2014 Kalaa Utsavam at the Esplanade. Some of Raka's other notable productions in the past include *Boundaries ... Dreams ... Beyond* (2008), *Circular Ruins* (2009), *Variations on a Theme* (2010), *Hungry Stones* (2011) and *Khayyam's Rubaiyat: Echoes In Dance* (2013). Raka also co-organised the Grey Festival, a contemporary Indian dance festival featuring performances, workshops, screenings and forums. In 2014, Chowk received a seed grant of \$80,000 from the NAC, a big recognition for a small contemporary dance institution rooted in the traditional forms of Odissi and Chhau. In this coming year, she is planning a series of small Studio performances for small audiences in the Chowk Studio and also a yet untitled work based on Bengali poetry in September.

## MAYA DANCE THEATRE

Kavitha Krishnan, founder of Maya Dance Theatre, started learning dance with K. P. Bhaskar at the age of 4, at the insistence of her mother, who had always wanted to learn dance but was simply not allowed by her parents or her circumstances. After a couple of years of the fairly strict tutelage of Bhaskar, she enrolled in SIFAS under Balagopalan, whose wife also turned out to be a pretty tough task master leading to Kavitha quitting again, and finally joining Apsaras Arts, where she immediately took to the imposing but affectionate Neila Sathyalingham. Among her co-students were Roshni Pillay and Dr. Chua Soo Pong. She performed her *arangetram* at the age of nine to a full house Victoria Theatre audience and then for the next two decades, she performed in most of Apsaras Arts productions and festivals in Singapore and around the world. She was encouraged to start choreographing while in Apsaras with her first choreographic experience at the age of fourteen. She was also a keen hockey player throughout her school years, and the constant wear and tear, combined with an accident on the hockey field, eventually led to a serious spinal injury in her early twenties which had to be operated on. Her doctors gave her little chance of ever being able to dance again post-surgery. But in less than a year after recovering from the surgery, after a lot of hard work and discipline, Kavitha willed herself to dance again, within the limitations and constraints of the surgical intervention, amazing her surgeon, V.K. Pillay.

Also, in the early 2000s, Neila recommended Kavitha to represent Singapore as a Bharatanatyam dancer in the ASEAN flagship, a joint dance production called "Realising Rama", involving dancers of different genres, from around ASEAN and the group toured India, Korea, China, Japan and Philippines under the direction of Denisa Reyes, artistic director of Ballet Philippines. Kavitha was involved in the World-in-Theatre programme in the company of dancers like Priyalatha Arun and Sonny Lim in 2003. She was also greatly influenced by contemporary dancer Jayanthi Siva. These experiences experimenting with modern forms of performing arts led her to quit her full time job as an occupational therapist. Also, learning that some of these other ASEAN dancers were making a living as full time dancers inspired her to set up an Arts event management





Maya Dance Theatre production Grey, Penang, 2013

and performance company, Apsara Asia. She had also decided to now focus on contemporary dance going forward. The first production, Bitter Chocolate, was in collaboration with World in Theatre artiste and staged at the Substation in 2004. Her next performance was “End of the Beginning”, created in Solo, Indonesia, along with two of her Realising Rama colleagues, and then showcased again in the Bali Arts festival. In late 2006, following the advice of the NAC, Kavitha created Maya Dance Theatre as a performance company, separate from the events management company which was incorporated as Apsara Asia Pte Ltd. Kavitha speaks of her vision for Maya Dance Theatre, “Maya wants to speak through body expression that incorporates Asian body culture.” She finds that most dancers who come to her are modern dancers with no training

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in traditional Asian dance. Maya exposes them to Asian dance technique and then to use this language to create new evolved forms of body movement. In early 2007, Bophana was presented by Maya Dance Theatre as their premier production at the Arts House. Subsequent productions include Grey, Atma, The Legend, Invoking Rasas, Standing in the Line in the Order of Height, Seeking Sita and Anwesa. In 2012, Maya Dance Theatre received a seed grant of \$50,000 from the NAC. While she appreciates the support of the NAC, Kavitha would like to see more support from the community in the future, "Right now I am forced to bargain with organisers when they approach me for an event. I have to tell them that I am doing a job, just like they are doing a job. And I wish they would realise the important role of artistes in society."

### AAKASH GANGA

Aakash Ganga's founder, Maalika Girish Panicker is a Kalakshetra graduate who arrived in Singapore in 1996 as a Bharatanatyam tutor at the Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society, where she served for almost fourteen years. In 2009, she set up her own dance school Aakash Ganga, where she teaches Bharatanatyam, Mohiniattam, folk and contemporary dance. Over the SIFAS tenure, where she was then known as Girish Panicker, Maalika trained hundreds of dancers, conducted more than 25 arangetrams, including one of a British national, who was an employee of the British High Commission, and choreographed and presented numerous thematic dance recitals. In 2007, she was awarded the Natya Kala Vipanchee title by Dr. M. Balamuralikrishna in Chennai.

Her choreography and training at several schools and junior colleges in Singapore have been awarded gold at the bi-annual Singapore Youth Festival dance competitions. She is also a regular judge for dance competitions on local television, and her senior disciple won the best choreographer award in Salangai Oli, a dance competition on Vasantham. Over the years, she has performed with distinguished dance Gurus such as C.V. Chandrasekhar, Vyjayanthimala Bali, Saroja Vaidyanathan and Lakshmi Viswanathan. Some of her own choreographic works include Sthri, Mohini, Ganges, Valli-Devayani Kalyanam and Bharata. She has performed over 200 solos and



Maalika Girish Panicker, Bharatanatyam and Mohiniattam dancer, and founder of Aakash Ganga

group productions in Singapore, India, Malaysia, Indonesia and Australia. Maalika takes particular pride in her detail orientation; she says "I am particular about every aspect of a performance, from the music to the hairdo to the stage setting, down to the decoration of the reception area, and even the food being served to guests!"

The list of artistes and institutions covered in this chapter is only a fraction of the numerous talented independent Gurus, performers and institutions who continue to thrive and grow in the vibrant Indian music



and dance scene in Singapore. There are many more independent artistes and teachers currently in Singapore, and some others who have passed away (like the late K. S. Ganapathy who founded Sabari Fine Arts) or who have left Singapore (like C.N. Thyagaraju, and Bharathi Murthy who established the dance school Bharatham School of Dance in 2009) after having contributed tremendously to the Singapore Indian arts community. There are also many other independent dance and music institutions such as Omkar Arts (set up by Sreedevy Viju-Pany in 1987), Jayakshetra Arts (founded by Kalakshetra graduate Shobhinya Karthikeyan in 2005), Tripataka school of dance (founded by Durga Devi Mani Maran in 2007), Indu Vijay's Taal School of Odissi and Centre for Holistic Enrichment Through Arts, CHETAS, (founded by Vaishnavi Anand and Bombay V Anand in 2014). Several ex-SIFAS teachers now have thriving private practices as independent teachers, such as violinist K. Sivaraman, sitar teachers Chandranath Bhattacharya and Sharafat Khan, flautist Tiruchy L. Saravanan (who set up the institution Vamshidwani in 2007), vocalist Gowri Gokul, Bharatanatyam dancer Minal Amit Dhamelia, and veena artistes Y. Bhagavati and Jayalakshmi Sugumar. There are likely many others whom we have missed in our documentation of these independent efforts.

Listening to the accounts of their artistic lives in Singapore, there are some common themes that run through these narratives – the repeated

influence of and interaction with the 'Big 4' institutions, the support of the National Arts Council without whose financial support it would be difficult to sustain performances, the growing numbers of collaborative and inter-disciplinary projects, the difficulty of making a livelihood as a performing artiste without any income from teaching, the increasing number of modern themes and attempts at group productions of what are still fundamentally solo art forms (Carnatic music and most genres of Indian classical dance), and the spread of centres of teaching across the island. Also commendable is the lack of competitiveness or divisiveness and indeed, instead, the thriving of a supportive ecosystem of musicians, dancers, teachers, community institutions like CCs and temples, students, parents, fans and connoisseurs of Indian classical music and dance. The 'Big 4' have enabled, rather than stifled, the growth of these independent endeavours over time, and today, a young prospective student of Indian classical music or dance is spoilt for choice. In most parts of Singapore, students should be able to find a teacher within a short commute of their home.

As more and more students graduate from the 'Big 4', and independent institutions, we can expect perhaps even greater growth in the coming years in this sector of the Indian classical music and dance industry. These developments bode well for a vibrant future for the Indian performing arts student, teacher and rasika!

